



Butcher Bird

In the dark on “Deer Monday”, I walked out to my stand on my place in the Chippewa National Forest. A clear sky overhead, I could still see the stars, and the Big Dipper caught my eye. When was the last time I noticed that? Maybe because life is busy and the days are full, I really don’t spend enough time looking up at the night sky, tending instead to collapse on the couch about the time the stars are shining.

It was one of those mornings of incredible stillness, where you can hear every little thing for the longest distance. As I arrived at the stand, I could hear an animal moving away. Clearly it must have heard me, but it was in no particular hurry, and you could hear every hoof beat of the deer. In hunting mode, I allowed myself to believe it must be a buck. In a bucks-only permit area, the doe I saw on opening morning would do me no good. These days, I actually have a strong preference to take a fawn, and would readily trade my buck tag in for the chance to do so. Someone else can shoot the big stuff. Younger animals taste better, and are so much easier to drag out of the woods.

I had moments leading up to this season, that I thought perhaps I just am not up to such things right now. There have been waves of this sudden arthritis I am experiencing. When it flares up, the enthusiasm I normally have for so many things is dampened by the pain. Gardening loses its luster in the face of aching hands. Opening just about any kind of package is tough without any grip strength. Even walking can be daunting when the joints in your feet hurt. Five lambs off the farm still made it into my freezer this fall, but not without a little help from my strong spouse for the heavier parts of that job. And all of the recent fall rains have brought standing water to much of my place, which can really limit your opportunities for mechanized deer retrieval. So the idea that I would have to shoot a deer old enough and big enough to sport antlers wasn’t really something I was fully embracing, given that I would also need to find a way to get that deer home to hang in my garage.

But a couple of days of sitting in that deer stand were having a beneficial impact on my outlook. Perhaps it was the watching of the light grow in the early mornings. The stars fade from the night sky, and as the sun hits the tree tops, you can feel the air begin to warm. Maybe it was the antics of the red squirrels, with all their angry scolding. I never grow weary of the croaking of the ravens. No doubt I loved the sound of the migrating Tundra swans, as high overhead you could hear their high-pitched “woo-ho, who-ho” calls. And then there’s the pileated woodpecker, screaming out his territory boundaries from various spots in the woods. My daughter’s friends, the grey jays brought a smile to my face, as 3 of them visited me over and over again. I’d far

rather give up my sandwich to these guys to cart away, than to eat it myself. One would even take his pieces from my hand. How cool is that?

Close on the heels of the jays were what I think of as the Butcher Birds. Magpies have a way of showing up whenever we are butchering on my place, and the magpie is definitely one of those smart birds that will pick up on what other birds are finding. They belong to the same intelligent family of birds as do ravens, crows and jays.

The black-billed magpie is mostly a bird of the cold, shrub-steppe environment of western North America. People are sometimes surprised to see it here in north central Minnesota. On the Chippewa National Forest, I see magpies around areas of mixed land ownership, where hay fields and forest are intermixed. Highly visible, this large black and white bird with the long tail and raspy call is a relative newcomer to our area, having expanded its range into the state from the Dakotas in the 1960s. The Minnesota Biological Survey and Minnesota Breeding Bird Atlas project both show current breeding records stretching from the northwestern part of the state across north central Minnesota. If you follow their history back a little farther, you learn that magpies followed bison-hunting Native Americans and lived on the refuse of their hunts. The range of the magpie in North America contracted with the demise of the bison. Since the late 1920s, the range was further contracted by the use of poison bait for coyote control. To prevent the birds taking the bait, poison grain was first spread to kill the birds, which was accomplished by the thousands.

Magpies were persecuted until the mid-twentieth century. The birds' feeding habits got them in trouble. They robbed trap lines, took gamebird or poultry eggs, predated songbird nests, and would peck at saddles sores on horses or mules until the animals died. The behavior of individual magpies would spread through the entire flock through learning. In the 1920's and 1930's a bounty of 1 cent per egg and 2 cents per head were paid in many western States, with an estimated death toll in Idaho alone of 150,000 magpies. Magpies are now protected under the Migratory Species Act.

Global warming is a new concern for the welfare of magpies. Shown in the Audubon Birds and Climate Report as "climate endangered", the black-billed magpie is one of a number of bird species whose ranges are predicted to change with climate change. The Report predicts how climate change could affect the range of 588 North American birds, 314 of which are predicted to lose more than 50% of their current climatic range by 2080. The magpie is one of 126 species classified as climate endangered because they are projected to lose more than 50% of their current range by the year 2050. The year 2050 is within the expected lifetime of many of us. You can find the report online at <http://climate.audubon.org> if you want to learn more about birds and climate change.

Magpies are opportunistic in their feeding, and will eat a variety of foods, including carrion, small mammals, nesting songbirds, insects, grain and wild fruits. They watch each other, and they watch predators with food, in order to figure out where there's food to be gained. They will take leftovers from predators, or steal food items if they are able. They will find food by gleaning ticks and other parasites from infested deer, moose and livestock. Presumably they did the same with bison.

One of the stranger magpie behaviors involves conducting gatherings around dead magpies. If a dead magpie is found, the magpie that finds it begins calling excitedly. Other magpies come, and as many as 40 birds will gather around, calling for perhaps 10 to 15 minutes. Afterwards, the birds fly off silently.

Magpies are monogamous, and may pair for life. The nest is built of sticks and mud, with a dome of thorny branches, to help ward off predators. It can take these birds 40 – 50 days to build a nest.

Magpies that are not harassed can become quite tame; those that are shot at are very wary. They are able to discern the difference between people, a fact learned by researchers involved in climbing their nests. A researcher who did not wear a mask when checking a nest was mobbed at her usual observation site the day after; even her car was recognized apart from other cars.

I don't think the magpies in my neighborhood know me as an individual, but they certainly are geared into checking out my place when we start putting lambs into the freezer in the fall. As soon as they detect butchering has begun, they begin paying us regular visits to see if anything is on the menu. I think they find deer season with its many gut piles to be a feeding bonanza. As for our eagles and other birds that focus on this food source, the use of lead ammunition poses a health risk when the birds ingest the fragments of toxic lead.

By Deer Monday, I had come to terms with the idea that I would, indeed shoot a buck and deal with all the work that would bring. I spent a couple of pleasant hours on the stand, watching the morning come alive. So still and quiet, it was easy to hear the occasional crunching of dry grass as the animal I had encountered in the dark moved around in a corner of the woods, hidden from sight but definitely present. There came the briefest of moments where the deer appeared, complete with antlers, and I got my chance. The copper bullet did its job. No lead fragments in this deer, the gut pile is safe for birds to consume and the meat healthy for the people who will be eating it.

The power of adrenaline is remarkable, and the little bit of manhandling I needed to do to get this animal out of the woods turned out not to be an issue. Pure luck landed him in a place accessible to a four-wheeler for game retrieval. If you can believe it, I did not experience any aches and pains until the day after I got that deer home and hanging. Not once did my hands complain when I field dressed it, or when I removed the hide. I've now added a pliers to my hunting pack, should I find grip strength to be an issue in the future.

Like plenty of other folks out there, I intend to continue my deer hunting in future years, despite the unfortunate effects of aging. There's something about this time in the woods that restores a person. It's the connection with the natural world, the enforced change in pace that allows you to really notice what's around us. Too much of our life is spent taking for granted that which is clearly not in unlimited supply, in this ever-shrinking world.



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